

Piece by Piece

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Piece by Piece

by [apfelgranate](#)

Summary

The first time Solas calls her *vhenan*, the first time Saar calls him *kadan*, and the times when they each find out what those words mean.

Now complete!

Notes

I started this fic because someone asked me how Solas reacts when Saar calls him *kadan* for the first time, thinking, in my unending hubris, oh this will be a simple short drabble :) And then it spiralled. As usual. *But* I am very happy with the end result, so, onwards!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

ar lath, 'ma vhenan.

Saar finds him in the library, curled up half asleep in one of the nooks, with a teetering stack of books next to him. A lamp, clearly running on the last of its oil, is perched on yet another pile of books by his knee. It's late, and the library is otherwise empty. Starlight falls in through the windows, in addition to the small light of the lamp, but even together they do more to emphasise the depth of the shadows than illuminate them.

She leans against the bookshelf, arms crossed, then nudges her foot against Solas's shin. He startles awake with a hiss.

"I hear you've been talking to Shokrakar. And to Katoh, and to Aban."

Hilariously, Solas actually looks guilty, but he nods.

"Despite the fact that they're just savage beasts under a thin sheen of civility?"

"That is not what I—"

She raises her eyebrows at him, and he makes a small, pained noise. It's more satisfying to witness than it probably should be, but Saar cares little. He can stand to take the discomfort after what he pulled.

"... Yes," he admits, after a long pause.

"Why?"

He glances toward the sputtering lamp. "Because it is as you said." His fingers tap nervously on the open book in his lap, then fold it shut. Saar catches the symbol of the Qun etched on the cover, before his hand covers it. "I let others' nightmares inform my—my perception of your people."

Saar crouches down in front of him and reaches for the book. Solas lets her, gaze flickering to and from her face like the unsteady lamplight. She reads the title, then flips to the middle. Her stomach twists a little.

"This is about Qunari," she says. "And it's—"

"An outsider's nightmares, yes." Solas's voice is soft. "I sought to know from where they originated. Tevinter has ample reason to paint Qunari as monstrous, but why does the South do so as well?"

She gives him a look. "I'm not Qunari."

"I'm well aware. This was—" He sighs. "There are no books about your people, nor *from* your people. No records. No—"

"No ruins to fall asleep in?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, well." Saar snaps the book closed and sits down heavily, with her back to the bookcase. She remembers the scars around her parent's mouth, the way certain Qunlat phrases still made her mother freeze. How her father had radiated guilt for months when she had come into her powers, and she hadn't understood *why* until, years later, that troop of arvaarad found her and she learned

he'd been *one of them*. How Shokrakar had given Kirkwall a wide berth for years, passing on good, easy jobs even remotely near the city. Aban's quiet night terrors, Katari's tenuous relationship with his self preservation instinct, the poems Kariss wrote and burned...

The list is long, and it keeps growing. Saar sighs.

"The only ruins we've got are our souls."

"So far, perhaps." Solas's voice is raw, and she blinks at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Skyhold is—" he gestures around them, to the heavy stone beyond the paper of the books and the wood of the shelves. "The fortress is ancient—it already brims with memories. Yet you... you are seeping into the foundations nonetheless. I suspect it will extend to the Valo-Kas in time, as dear as you hold them."

The hair on the nape of Saar's neck rises; with what, she's not sure. "I'm 'seeping'?"

"I wandered Skyhold while sleeping, as I did when you found me first. Spirits sang the names of stars into the sky," he whispers. "You showed them to me once before—in the foothills, beneath the moons? I did not know their names, but recognized them."

"And now?"

"The spirits called them Hissera and Kost. Katoh told me the translations are hope, and peace...?"

Something under Saar's skin prickles and she rubs at her jaw.

"So," she mutters. "You're learning."

He smiles, small and skewed. "I try not to. The Chantry doesn't look too kindly on challenges to the status quo."

That makes her laugh, warm and bright and sudden, bubbling up from her lungs. Maker, she's missed it.

"That's good," she says, leaning into his space. "Because I really liked kissing you when you weren't an asshole. I'd like to keep doing it."

Solas stares at her, eyes wide. Even in the dim light of the nighttime library, she can see the blush stain his face.

Slowly, keeping her eyes on him, Saar puts the book aside. Braces herself on one hand and leans further. Lays two fingers against the curve of his jaw, slides them below his chin, the way she did the first time. Except *this* time, Solas sways forward long before they're sharing air.

She catches him around the waist, pulls him close. The tower of books goes scattering and she barely remembers to kill the lamp before it starts a fire.

It's sweet this time, too. Solas follows her when she pulls back and she grins into the kiss, then gently bites his lower lip.

"Missed me, did you?"

He lets out a slow sigh and buries his face in the crook of her neck.

“Ar lath, 'ma vhenan.”

The words are barely a whisper. Saar's brain stumbles, trying to translate them. It's been a good long while since she used anything but greetings in Elvhen, but—

Oh.

“What was that?” she asks, very quietly. In her arms, Solas goes stiff.

“Nothing of import. Simply...” He draws away; she feels him shrug jerkily. “It matters not. It doesn't mean anything.”

Oh.

She summons blue fire to hover above her shoulder to replace the lamplight she doused, so she's able to see him. It doesn't help. His gaze is averted, his mouth a tight line. She cups his cheek, tries to meet his eyes, and it only gets worse.

It doesn't mean anything.

“Are you sure about that?” she asks.

Solas says nothing, but he shivers under her hand. And the way he's looking at her... like he's in pain from touching her. Like he'd be in pain if she *didn't* touch him.

She could push, probably. She could make him admit it. But she remembers something else he told her, something that was buried underneath the anger on behalf of her people.

You show a wisdom and gentleness that I have never encountered outside of the deepest memories of the fade.

Her chest feels hollow.

Blood and blight, she thinks. What *happened* to you, that you think I'm as good as it gets? How badly did you hurt, to fall apart like this when I touch you with care?

"How about you tell me later, what it translates to," she murmurs, "even if it means nothing."

He watches her, wide-eyed in the blue-washed dark. And eventually, he nods, his face tilting into the curve of her palm. She slides her hand from his cheek down to the side of his neck, and he lets out a shuddery little breath, eyes fluttering closed.

Like he can't quite help it.

Saar kisses him again.

i love you, my heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They keep watch on a ridge which overlooks the plains. Officially, they're taking a break, but Cole is perched on a spire of the ruins that dot the ridge, and Blackwall paces back and forth, hand on the pommel of his sword and eyes on the horizon.

Solas was not particularly keen to return here, but the thought of remaining in Skyhold while Saar threw herself headlong into the Orlesian civil war was even more unpleasant. At least from their current vantage, he cannot see the place by the river where his friend died.

The river...

He feels for the stone in his pocket. It is roughly circular, worn smooth by time. Mottled grey, with several inclusions of dawnstone. He picked it up when they made their way along a dried-out portion of a tributary riverbed. It looks nothing like the rough pale ochre bit of rock into which Saar is currently carving.

She sits with her back against a wall, head bent in concentration, focused on the working in her hands. But every so often, her eyes flick to Cole, whose hand shapes a quick signal.

Still her magic is a low, constant hum—the stone giving way to her deliberate power.

Solas's gaze travels from her to Cole's now tensed back, to the alert stance of Blackwall below the spire. In the distance, he can make out a Dalish scouting party heading towards a small group of Orlesian soldiers. They don't fly anyone's flag, but the shape of their armor is distinct.

The humming fades.

Saar rises and moves to stand beneath Cole's perch; she holds up the carved stone. Twisting curls mimic a halla's horns.

"Bring our new friends a little gift," she tells him. "And tell them to steer clear of the soldiers."

Be careful, Solas thinks. Cole gives him a smile as he darts down from his perch, then makes his way into the plain. Solas's gaze sweeps to the soldiers. The group has been inching closer to the ridge for the past hour.

"It appears those soldiers wish to become your friends as well," he tells Saar.

"They're hardly soldiers," Blackwall mutters, but it is without anger. "Conscripts, or swayed by lofty promises of gold and glory. And now deserters."

"They're not going to desert *me*."

"You can be too generous with your trust, my lady."

"Trust has nothing to do with it."

Solas doesn't interject. Saar's ability to rally people around her is frighteningly familiar. The borderline arrogant confidence, the seeming ease with which she pulls in those who are hungry, who are hunted, how she looks at anyone full of desperation and sees an asset—it all stirs

memories he'd rather leave undisturbed.

And worse still is the voice at the back of his head which whispers that she is different—that she sees *allies*, not assets. Some desperate, foolish hope for—

"Go look honorable and protective, you're excellent at that," Saar says with a pat to Blackwall's shoulder, their disagreement interrupted for now.

Blackwall nods, blushing faintly under the praise. Solas watches as the man descends the ridge to wait at its bottom for the soldiers, then scans the plains. He cannot find Cole by sight, although that isn't surprising. He can only hope Cole stays out of everyone else's sight as well.

"Hey."

Saar embraces him from behind, big and warm and gentle. No trace of the calculating commander left, like the woman with her eyes on the horizon and her mind on the world couldn't possibly be the same person who holds him now. Not for the first time, Solas finds himself wishing he could believe Saar's tender face is the only one that is real.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," he lies. She squeezes him, and he can't resist leaning into her, just a little.

"I appreciate you being here," she says quietly. "Can't be that pleasant. But I rest easier with you around to watch my back."

"More than our sturdy Warden, or Cole?"

"You notice different things. Also—" she ducks her head and nips the top of his ear, "—*you* I get to kiss."

Solas does not point out that she could very well kiss Blackwall. That she *has* kissed the man, in fact. He only chuckles softly and arches his neck to give her access to his throat. He receives another kiss for it, and a pleased rumble emanating from Saar's chest that has gooseflesh rise on his nape.

She excels at this—making him forget even the horizon exists. Not with intent, of course. It is his own weakness rearing its selfish head. Her affection spills heedlessly, and every drop of it directed at him, he soaks up like a starved hound. And just as an eager pup, *ar lath*, '*ma vhenan* crowds on his tongue in response.

He kisses her cheek, lips pressed shut, to cage in the words.

Every day, it becomes harder to grant his heart the reprieve of secrecy. He catches himself wondering, would it truly be worse to know with certainty her feelings do not run as deeply as his do? Worse than lying to her about this facet of him as well? Worse than there being not a single soul in this world who knows something *real* about him?

The stone weighs heavy in his pocket. He intended to wait until they were back at camp, but right now...

"Ooh, that's a *pretty* one." The clear delight in her voice is music to his ears, settling into his bones.

"I thought you might like it."

“Course I do.” Saar laughs and lets him go, then snatches the stone from him to examine it. She tilts it this way and that, squinting critically.

"Could do flowers, with the pink bits. Or a pride demon with wonky eyes." She flips it over, smile fading, and gives him a soft glance. "How about flowers? As a memento of your friend, or a marker for their... their grave. If you want it back after I'm done?"

Bittersweet warmth washes into Solas's chest; the corners of his eyes sting.

“It's a gift,” he murmurs. “You can do with it what you like.”

She looks behind them, eyes roving over the ruins, fingers curled tight around the stone. The vibration of her magic starts up again, and she leans against the faded brickwork of the spire that Cole used as his lookout.

“I will,” she says softly. “Tell me when you see our spirit boy returning.”

Solas gives her space to work, casting his gaze over the plains. Something is welling up from his chest to tighten his throat, and it draws his gaze back to Saar. Her hair is still in the braid he wove for her that morning. They sat in front of the tents, muddy pink sunlight lancing through the clouds. Cole threaded flowers into the braid, and into Blackwall's beard. They lost the flowers during a mad dash through the forest, but before that, their scent was sweet and constant.

His feet carry him close again without conscious thought and he rests his forehead against the back of her shoulder.

“I love you, my heart.”

The humming stops. He forces himself to keep talking.

“*Ar lath, 'ma vhenan*. That is what it means.” He lays his palm against her spine, feels the thrum of her magic, now held inside instead of flowing freely. “But you knew that already, did you not?”

Saar breathes deeply; her ribcage moves with it.

“...I had my suspicions, yeah.”

She turns, and for a split second Solas is tempted to turn with her, to keep hiding behind her broad back. It is always so tempting, to pretend nothing else—not his guilt, not his duty, not the wretched mark eating its way into her hand—even matters. He doesn't, but it is a near thing.

When they come face to face, Saar's expression is cast in shadow against the pallid sky, the sunlight diffuse yet blinding to gaze upon directly.

“Tell me again.”

He shivers; gooseflesh rises on his skin like it does when the sun hits it just right after a cold night.

“*Ar lath ma*,” he tells her, “*emma vhenan*.”

She bends down, she kisses him, nudges her tongue inside his mouth. He opens for it, tastes salt and sweetness from the salt meat and apples they ate earlier, when their rest had truly been for resting. She tugs him close and he grabs for her belt.

“Erm, my lady—”

Saar giggles, so bright and carefree it makes something in Solas's chest lurch sideways. They part, and she folds her arm around his shoulders to keep him pressed against her front.

"Yes, Blackwall?" she asks, like she wasn't trying to kiss Solas breathless a second ago. Blackwall wears an expression like he is trying to pretend the same, and not quite succeeding. The tips of Solas's ears grow hot. Embarrassment, but mainly pleasure. Saar's chest is warm, and he can feel her heartbeat through her sternum against his cheek.

"The Orlesian soldiers are approaching. Rather rapidly."

Saar's entire posture shifts, though the change from big to towering is fluid. The Inquisitor, master over dragons and demons, stands among them now. Blackwall straightens even further; Solas moves aside to let her pass. She does—and halfway, she halts, bends down, lays her mouth against his ear.

"I love you, too," she murmurs, then keeps walking.

The words hit him like hot spiced wine: a spill of warmth down his insides, a cold shiver down his back to the tips of his fingers in counterpoint. It makes him want to burrow into a warm nest and wrap himself around her and ignore the rest of the world.

But instead, they leave behind the ruins atop the ridge, so that Saar may lay claim to yet another pack of ragged, hungry souls.

Chapter End Notes

Those additional "pairing" tags are finally starting to pull their weight around here, huh

kadan.

Chapter Notes

This is it! This chapter is the reason I started this fic, and probably my favorite one of the bunch. I've got a lot of feelings about Saar's world-changing ambitions, okay

The Inquisition's ranks have swelled with deserters from the Orlesian armies. The vast majority aren't actual Chevaliers, but the friction they bring into camps full of elves, dwarves, vashoth, and Fereldan humans nonetheless is a lot to manage. Saar spends entire days breaking up fights and defusing arguments before they can spiral into violence. It doesn't always work—but she hasn't lost anyone to infighting. Yet.

It galls her. Her people should stick together. Of course, that becomes increasingly difficult with every new addition to *her* people...

By the time Solas starts to shadow her on the third day, she's gone from frustrated to angry. She corners him on her way back up to the fortress, looming over him.

"Did you get sent to haul me back because I'm spending too much time with the undisciplined *rabble*? Not enough time with our high and mighty triumvirate and all their dignitaries?"

"There were some pointed implications, yes," is his unruffled reply. "But I came because no one has stolen books from my hands to complain about the convoluted writing style of Chantry scholars in days."

That takes the wind out of her sails.

"You think that, too," she mutters. "Admit it."

"Don't slander me such, vhenan." Yet he easily fits himself beneath her arm and against her side as they walk. It drags a tired smile to her lips; she squeezes him close. They duck through servants' corridors and little-used halls to reach Solas's room, and he gently coaxes her to sit. She sprawls out on a few pillows on the floor with her back to his bed, and he climbs onto the frame behind her, then pulls the ribbon from her braid.

"I must confess," he says idly, "I expected grievous bodily harm to have occurred by now, either to your newest recruits or perpetrated by them."

She barks out a laugh. "Not for lack of trying. The farmers who came in recently? They're from the Plains. Came because their fields were torched on a retreat, cattle slaughtered, the works. Turns out a good handful of my new ones were part of that battalion. That was a *fun* reunion."

His fingers card into her hair, down from her scruffy scalp to the braid at the nape of her neck. "It seems you have soothed deep wounds, then. Or at the very least staunched the flow of blood. Does that not satisfy you?"

"It's not—" She sighs. "I can't expect them to forgive and forget—I wouldn't, either, in their place. I just." She closes her eyes and exhales noisily, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her scar itches. "They don't have to love each other—Maker, they don't even have to *like* each other. But I *need*

them to work together.”

“The threat Corypheus poses will certainly aid you in that. A common enemy does wonders for unity.”

“And what happens when Corypheus is dead, huh? I can’t keep finding enemies. I don’t *want* to. I want—” She breaks off. It feels vulnerable, saying it aloud. Like she’s giving too much away. Leliana had the gall to call her naive—but she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Still, they remain at her side. Saar isn’t sure yet what to make of that.

Solas doesn’t push her. He finishes disentangling her braid with his fingers, then picks up a comb. They sit together in silence, apart from their breathing and the hiss of the comb through her hair. Saar relaxes progressively, sinking backwards into the warm press of Solas’s inner thighs that frame her shoulders. Eventually he asks if she’d like a braid for the night and she nods; she doesn’t want to give up this gentle quiet yet. She curls her hand around his ankle because it’s the only part she can reach easily, stroking her thumb over the bone. The scent of his room, of *him*—ink and parchment, herbs and fur—wraps around her just like the warmth and the touch of his body. The feeling settles as a glowing ball between her lungs.

“Do you remember the girl in Redcliffe?” she asks. “Freckles, elf-blooded?”

His fingers still, then continue. “The one who claimed she was no mage?”

“She was *terrified* of it,” Saar says quietly. “I want no kid ever having to feel that fear again... No kid dying in some stranger’s arms because his own family turned on him. No vashoth falling apart from their nightmares without anyone to catch them. No old templar begging some merc they think is a demon to take their pain away. No servants having to throw their hopes on a heretic because the rich blighters they work for treat them like cattle. No Dalish hunted down for daring to live on their own land, no more fields burned and people starving so some noble asshole with a sword can win a battle, no elves’ lives torn apart for *sport*, no tranquil mage used as *crafting material*, no Venatori slave running into *my fucking sword* because death is apparently better than—”

She sucks in a shuddering breath around the lump in her throat.

“*Shit.*”

There is soft pressure against the top of her head, a kiss laid into her shorn hair.

“You want the world to be kinder than it is, vhenan,” Solas murmurs. “That is not weakness, even if it leads to pain.”

She clenches her eyes shut, rubs at the scar across her nose.

“It can be kinder,” she grunts. “I’ll *make* it kinder, just watch me.”

Solas’s hands jerk, tugging painfully on her hair. She bites down a curse, but before she can twist around to ask him what the fuck that was for, she feels him cradle the back of her skull, soothing the sting.

“My apologies.” He lets out a shaky breath. “I... did not expect that. Very few of those in power possess such convictions.”

Her skin prickles, feels like it’s stretched too tight. Gooseflesh just waiting to pebble it and make her shudder. She does turn around now; she rests one arm atop his thigh and looks up at him. He wears that expression again, the one she still doesn’t quite understand. Like she unmoored him

somehow.

“Is it really that much of a surprise, still?” she asks carefully.

“How deep your wrath runs? Yes,” is his quiet, hoarse reply. “But a welcome one.”

Saar bites her lip against the emotion that wells up in her throat; words bleeding from beyond her lungs, from the exhausted, wounded parts of her: Tell me I’m not promising the impossible. Tell me it’s not hopeless. Tell me I won’t burn out before I see this through.

Yet she lives because she has neither waited for reassurance nor asked permission to exist, to fight, to take in anyone who calls on her in their need. The Inquisition—*her people*—grow and grow, despite the allowances the world would grant them. And so, she doesn’t ask.

But when Solas reaches down and cups her cheek, she lists into the touch with a sigh. He bends to lean his forehead against hers, the way Vashothari do, and the warmth that had been nesting in her chest floods her entire body.

“It will be difficult,” he whispers. “It will take time.”

“I know. *I know.*” She pushes against him, into his touch. Feels like she could sing fire. “That’s not gonna stop me.”

He pushes back, presses close, and whatever his reply might have been gets lost between their lips. By the time they separate, she’s manhandled him backwards onto the bed, his thighs now rising to frame her waist. He has fistfuls of her shirt clenched in his fingers, the fabric pulled tight across her back and shoulders.

“Share my bed tonight,” he breathes into the space between them. “Let me guard your dreams.”

“That might be a tall order,” she murmurs, not because she actually wants to leave, but because ever since she gained the mark, her dreams had become wild and unpredictable. More so than dreams usually were, anyway.

Solas cocks an eyebrow at her, mouth pulling into a tiny smirk. “Oh? Do you have any other fadewalkers in your employ whose skill set might be up to the task?”

“None as humble as you.”

She kisses him once more, savors the small noise it pulls from his lungs. Her bed is really too far to suffer the trip, and his, along with its owner, is right here. And underneath her skin still hums a restless energy, something he has a knack for soothing.

She stays. They spend lazy minutes trading kisses and calloused touches while they undress for bed. She drifts off with Solas’s smooth voice in her ear and his fingers drawing patterns on the back of her shoulder. Her sleep is deep, and the only wisps of dreams she remembers come morning are of rampantly growing wildflowers claiming the walls of Skyhold’s gardens.

“Vhenan...”

She grunts, all the acknowledgment of a new day she’s willing to grant in the moment.

“The sun is high.”

“Uhgn.”

He chuckles. “Usually it is me who is so loathe to leave the dreaming realm. Are you quite certain nothing ominous is afoot?”

“Don’t make me *smother* you, kadan,” she grumbles, pushing her face more firmly into his chest. Solas lets out a sound like a panicked frog. Saar has at least enough presence of mind to shift some of her weight off of him—but not all of it. He’s so warm, and she’s still muzzy with sleep.

“What was that?” he croaks. His chest moves underneath her cheek.

“Hrmg?”

“*Kadan*. You—you’ve never called me that before.”

Oh.

She blinks slowly, drifting further into wakefulness. He’s right, she realizes. That warm ball of happiness sits snug behind her ribs, its glow radiating outwards.

Oh, she had planned to be lucid for it... but this works, too.

"Haven't I?" she asks, and can't quite keep the grin out of her voice.

“*Saar*—” He sounds so plaintive, it makes her giggle.

“Not so fun now, is it?” she teases, pushing herself up on her elbows. “Tell me, how’s it feel to not understand something your lover tells you? I personally wouldn’t know, of course, from first-hand experience.”

“You don’t,” he mutters, voice small, ears low, and face ruddy. “You know—you *knew* Elvhen.”

“And *you* assumed I didn’t,” she counters brightly. “Besides, I’m far from fluent.” She leans down and kisses the tip of his nose, not yet done with teasing.

“Does it matter that much? You already know I love you.”

Solas’s entire expression unravels into pained longing. He catches her chin in his palm, follows the curve of her cheek with that tender touch up to her horns.

“It matters because it is *your* word.”

Ah.

“Well...” She hides her smile, softer now and giddy, in the crook of his neck. “Then you know where to go to find out, don’t you?”

“...I take it back. There is not a shred of gentleness in you.”

She laughs and holds him close; he laces his fingers over the nape of her neck and mouths *vhenan* against the skin of her temples.

where the heart lies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Valo-Kas have not yet returned to Skyhold from their current mission.

Solas does not spend half his days in a nook of one of Skyhold's towers with a good view of the pass, waiting. In a moment of weakness, he contemplates simply asking the Iron Bull, but discards the thought as soon as it comes.

The Iron Bull is Qunari, despite his pretensions to vashoth mercenary life. And although Solas sees the cracks in the Bull's convictions—how Saar's anger creeps further under his skin with every day, how the careful attention of the Valo-Kas erodes his jovial distrust, how his heart has long since turned for his Chargers—he yet remains Qunari.

And Saar—Saar is not.

She is, however, intolerably sweet to Solas as apparent compensation for refusing to tell him what *kadan* means. It leaves him feeling molten and overwhelmed with frightening regularity. He suspects in truth it is part of the teasing game to her; if so, he can hardly begrudge her the revenge.

Agonizing days later, Cole joins him at his perch.

“They’re coming back,” he says without preamble. “Exhausted, bleeding, giddy.”

Solas lets out a slow, deliberate sigh.

“Thank you, Cole.”

Cole shifts on his feet, restless. Solas gives him a gentle look, and a silence to fill should he wish it. It doesn't take long.

“That was fine, right? Telling you? I'm not supposed to dig deep, I don't want to hurt anyone like that again, but you're hurting not knowing—”

Solas touches the brim of his hat, a small nudge. “You have told me nothing a scout might not also have observed, or the gatekeepers in a little while.”

Cole wrings his hands, a hesitant smile curling the edges of his mouth. “Should I tell the healers? Right? For the aches and pains, the sting.”

“I think they would greatly appreciate swift medical attention, yes.”

Silently, Cole slips from the room. Solas spends several minutes collecting his things; the blanket, his notes, charcoal pen, the old treatise he had intended to peruse again and barely touched. There is no rush, he tells himself. The knowledge he seeks will not disappear overnight, and right now the Valo-Kas will be busy making their reports and having their wounds tended. He has waited a while already, he can wait a few days more. At least two, to give them time to recuperate and settle in once more.

His patience lasts barely until the next morning. Before breakfast, he hunts down Aban. They are sitting with Kaariss near the tavern, shoulders pressed together. Kaariss scratches verses into a wax

tablet, while Aban squints and offers commentary. Solas suspects Aban might be the only one who genuinely likes Kaariss's poetry.

At his greeting, both of them look up.

"Fadewalker!" Kaariss gives him an exaggerated salute. "What brings you out so early on this fine and sonnet-worthy day?"

"Hey, Chuckles." Aban's reply is far quieter, but they smile at him, apparently genuine.

Something warm and liquid slips down inside Solas's chest. It has been happening more and more often lately—Varric straightening Cole's hat, the scouts' delighted grins when Harding blushed at something Saar said to her, the terrible joke Dorian had told during the last downpour that had made the Iron Bull guffaw and Vivienne smirk, farmers' children climbing over Blackwall and Sera to pilfer carved toys—and he doesn't dare examine what its cause is. Instead, he clasps his hands together behind his back. "I have a request, if you are willing to indulge me."

"Depends, how long is it gonna take?" asks Aban, Kaariss already bent over his poetry again.

"It is but a question. The meaning of—the meaning of the word *kadan*, what is it?"

Kaariss's head snaps up, lips parted in surprise, while Aban's wide mouth spreads even further, sharp vashoth teeth glittering in the morning sun.

"Oh, you've got it *bad*, haven't you."

Solas refuses to dignify that with a response. "I'm asking for a translation and information on usage—can you provide these, or will you require bribing?"

That gets him a laugh from both of them. "Now that you mention it... Come on, I've got something you can help me with." Aban leads him into the stables, to a box containing a very nervous hart he hasn't seen before. Solas eyes the animal, the way it dances back and forth.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Calm it down, distract it. I think it's got a thorn or something stuck in its hind leg, but it won't let me get close."

"I'm not an expert on these animals."

Aban knocks their elbow into his shoulder. "No need to play coy, Chuckles. I've seen you with Ataashi's hart—I know you're good at talking them down."

"They're not identical creatures, Aban."

"Yeah, but this one comes from a Dalish clan, too. And *you* know way too much Elvhen, even if your pronunciation is all weird."

Solas swallows down the retort that wants to escape him. Considering how much time has passed, it *is* a minor miracle that the way he speaks is even recognized as Elvhen. He carefully reaches for the hart's snout, murmuring what he had to calm Saar's mount: an old promise, from the old world.

The Wolf will protect you; he will break your shackles, he will purge your marks; if only you believe, we are not gods.

He keeps up his steady stream of reassurances, gently stroking the hart's snout as he does so. Its

ears flick back and forth, until finally they settle forwards, its attention focused on him. From his periphery, he can see Aban move towards the back and bend down. The hart shifts and Solas softens his voice to a coo; abruptly it flinches, whining, but Aban quickly straightens and presses their broad body against the animal to still it.

“Got it! Alright, easy now...”

Together, they maneuver the hart toward the back of the box, then exit and latch the door.

“Will you be able to tend to the wound on your own?” Solas asks. Aban shrugs.

“Probably. If not, I’ll ask for help. Might wanna keep your schedule free just in case. And the literal translation is, *where the heart lies*.”

The blood rushes in Solas’s ears, drowning out even his thunderous heartbeat.

“Do you—do you use it like that?” he asks, voice hoarse. “In the singular. *The* heart.”

Aban gives him a long look, which grows uncomfortably gentle by the end.

“You wanna know if you’re unique, is that it?”

Solas turns towards the hart again. “I am well aware that I am not the only person she calls *kadan*.” He can only hope he doesn’t sound as wretched as he feels, in that moment. Jealousy is the last thing on his mind when he thinks of all the people Saar loves and has loved—but that doesn’t make it painless. If he is not unique, then whatever part of her heart he will break once it all ends, the rest will still be filled with love. How could he even begin to articulate the bitter relief that blooms in his chest at the thought?

“We use it a lot of ways,” Aban says slowly. “For close friends, for lovers, for friends who are sometimes lovers. For mainly sexual partners, too, although that’s rarer.”

“How do you discern which meaning it is? A matter of stress?”

“It’s not that complicated. Or, more, sometimes...” Aban drifts off, looking past him. “Over here, Ataashi!”

Saar stands in the doorway, gilded by sunlight. She waves at them and approaches. Solas’s heart doesn’t skip a beat when her gaze lands on him—

“Hey, kadan.”

—although it tries. Aban claps their hand against his back; his breath stutters.

“You listen to everything else they tell you,” they whisper to him. “That’s how you figure it out.”

Saar knocks her forehead against Aban’s in greeting, and bends to kiss Solas’s temple.

“Vhenan,” he says, “I didn’t mean to disappear—”

He will, one day. He must. He—

“Don’t worry,” is Saar’s easy reply. She smirks, with no attempt to hide it, and it steals his air. “I thought you might be on a... research errand.”

Aban cackles. “I’ll get some food. Come join me when you’re done making eyes at each other.”

As they leave, the dust of the stables, disturbed by their passage, dances in beams of light around them.

“...Were you successful? In your research?”

He glances up at Saar. She’s still smirking, but it has gentled, her voice soft like he is the spooked hart who might bolt.

“I think so,” he says quietly. He feels her hand on his hip and moves into the embrace without a thought. She lifts him as though he weighs nothing, holding him with her arms around his hips and thighs. Then her stomach growls.

“Are you perchance hungry, vhenan?”

“Don’t act like you didn’t skip breakfast, too. Besides, I had to oversee another shipment of the books you ordered brought into the library. I can carve myself an hour or so; we could tear into them together after eating? And there’s a few young mages I think you should meet, they were real excited about learning from a ‘proper hedgemage’.”

Solas’s heart flutters within his chest, as though knocked loose. It is more—less—a different kind of frightening than—

I’ll make it kinder—

He sways down, kisses the bend of her nose, where the scar runs.

“Yes.”

Yes, I was successful. Yes, I’ll play the hedgemage. Yes, I love you. Yes, I love—

Chapter End Notes

...and that's how a god gets his heart stolen:

piece
by
piece.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! I've got a dragon age-specific [side blog](#) on tumblr, feel free to drop me an ask about this fic or talk about dragon age in general, and please leave a comment if you can, it fuels the writerly forge :D

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!